Chapter 8

Enterprise Systems, Power and Improvisation: Equipping Universities for Mass Production?

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ABSTRACT

Enterprise systems (ES) have been extensively procured in large organizations but much research fails to develop sociotechnically informed approaches that facilitate their implementation whilst understanding the impact of integrated technology on professional working practices within complex organizational environments. This chapter takes a critically informed sociotechnical approach to power and improvisation in ES implementation. The contribution is a combined “circuits of power-improvisation” (CPI) framework which can facilitate a better understanding of ES implementation, sociotechnical theory, and practice. Practical lessons learned from the study may potentially be used to avoid some of the problems experienced with the over-zealous and rapid introduction of digital technologies into university organizations where the risk is that they become a student mass production system. It highlights the important role of power and improvisation, enabled and afforded by new digital technologies, in what may be misrepresented as planned strategic and deliberate organizational change.

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INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, increasingly complex forms of organization have developed in response to the pressures from globalisation, economic uncertainty and market instability. In addition, rapid technological developments, especially in information and communications (now commonly termed digital) technologies, have provided opportunities for the adoption of new management practices—especially those based on principles of performance monitoring, reporting, staff accountability and control. This is particularly prominent in both the private and public sectors, where objectives focusing on efficiency, competitiveness, quality, and accountability have led to an emphasis on the development of new metrics underpinned by a culture of performance management, greater centralisation and hierarchical systems. In order to facilitate and reinforce these new management regimes, deliberate organizational strategies have often entailed the procurement, adoption and implementation of Enterprise Systems (ES). This is particularly evident in sectors such as Higher Education in the UK where, in the past, there have been more professional and collegial forms of work organization, professional autonomy and localised decision making (Fowler & Gilfillan, 2003; Pollock & Cornford, 2004; Oliver & Romm, 2009; Wagner et al., 2010). The rise of managerialism, underpinned by ES technology and more recently artificial intelligence and machine algorithms, has given rise to a new form of technocracy based on key drivers of machine efficiency and effectiveness that has begun to dominate the human and social aspects of work and knowledge-based systems that have been developed over many years in organizations. This raises new issues regarding the maintenance of an appropriate balance between human, social and technical aspects of work thus giving rise to the need for more informed sociotechnical approaches and methods to be adopted in ES implementations that also now extends to digital transformation strategies.

Emerging research (Wagner et al., 2010; Dong et al., 2009) would also appear to indicate that many organizations, although having ambitious Information Technology (IT) strategic plans in place, find large scale enterprise systems overwhelming during implementation and may adopt organizational actions which respond to unfolding events resulting in unexpected and unintended consequences of the implementation as it progresses. One such consequence may be the ability to engage in opportunistic re-organization strategies afforded by the assimilation of new managerialism (Clarke & Newman 1997) within the organization and, with it, a culture of command and control that is often incongruent with existing management cultures and organizational structures (Deem, 2004; Deem & Brehoney, 2005). The effects of ES adoption and its relationship to the redistribution of power and the alteration of political structures
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